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"Lately, she's been seeing
things differently"

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The Denied Image

Gianluca Cosci

Abstract

The following essay explores the notion of iconoclasm and image erasure through the presentation of a brief selection of my artworks in the context of some relevant examples of contemporary creations. In this overview of my art practice I will begin by discussing a work from the early 1990s and provide a general introduction to my initial position, which was primarily driven by institutional critique stances. From there, I will draw connections between my work and the iconoclastic practices of artists like Ai Weiwei and Markus Schinwald, which involve the use of Appropriation Art as a means to critique the socio-economic status quo. The concept of overpainting, which forms a key element of my artistic approach, will also be discussed through analysis of the work of several painters such as Arnulf Rainer, Cy Twombly and Robert Ryman, with their distinct abilities to suggest mystery, mysticism and transcendence through their abstract creations. In the end, overpainting in contemporary art will be examined in relation to two specific examples of censorship: one by the Taliban and the other by the organisers of the 1964 New York World's Fair, emphasising their broad, respective differences but also highlighting the surprising power of resilience of images and the importance of latency for their fruition.

On Appropriation

While researching for my Ph.D., I discovered *Untitled*, a modified ready-made consisting of a clay sculpture dating back to the Song dynasty (960-1279) and sealed in a whisky bottle in 1993. This artwork is a very early piece by Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist renowned, among other things, for his politically charged artworks constituted by appropriated ancient artefacts and salvaged architectural elements.

The found object is, in this example, trapped in a mass-produced whisky bottle that could be seen as the symbol of western consumerism and decadence. According to Merewether (48), this combination creates a tension between various opposites: the unique, antique, hand-made sculpture and the disposable, modern, industrial object.

In a similar vein I created – also in 1993 – an equally appropriative artwork involving an eighteenth century terracotta head, placed inside a mass-produced beer glass. In this piece, there is, similarly, a strong contrast between the unique artefact and the cheap, industrial glass that downgrades the found sculpture to a melancholic relic, trapped inside a vulgar vessel that almost humiliates its beauty.

My inspiration for this piece was *Wood Sculpture (Scultura lignea [Oggetti in meno 1965-66])*, 1965-1966 by Michelangelo Pistoletto who placed an ancient wooden sculpture half inside an orange plexiglass cuboid – a piece whose irreverent approach to tradition had a deep impact on me as it was the first time I was exposed to a contemporary piece made by using another, ancient artwork. In doing so, Pistoletto anticipated the current practice of using antique sculptures by some contemporary artists such as Danh Vo (Fulton) or Francesco Vezzoli (Needham).

Fig. 1: Gianluca Cosci. *Senza Titolo*. 1993. Eighteenth century terracotta head in a beer glass, height 16 cm.

My interest in using found artefacts was greatly revived after moving from London to Brussels in the early 2010s. Living in the Belgian capital was an important factor in rediscovering Appropriation Art methodologies in my art practice, as a reaction to the architectural eyesores that blight Brussels: my vandalising of existing paintings wanted to mimic the vandalization of the city's architecture. Since the 1960s the city's urban landscape has been disfigured by blind overdevelopment, even at the expense of important, world-class historic buildings. As described by van der Drift: "The city and its residents were subject to a modernization fever that had a significant impact on the urban fabric and the identity of the city. . . . The pejorative term *Brusselization* refers to this inexorable urban development in the post-war period" (4). In this respect, Brussels could be seen as one of the most glaring examples of the ultimate triumph of unbridled, extreme capitalism, ironically, not in a too dissimilar way from what has been happening in China since the Maoist revolution; first as ideological programme and more recently as a consequence of pure *laissez-faire* capitalism that typically ignores the cultural importance of ancient buildings for financial profit (Branigan). In that sense, Ai Weiwei is probably one of the most prominent contemporary artists to confront the problem of state-sponsored systemic architectural destruction as described by Tinari (qtd. in "Ai Weiwei"):

> What appears at first like the sublimation of an ancient object's financial value and cultural worth into a different yet parallel carrier of updated value and worth also serves as a satire of the ruling regime's approach to its patrimony, and of contemporary China's curious relation to its past, a situation where destruction of historical artefacts happens almost daily.

In the appropriation and modification of existing works of art, there is a degree of destruction that is reproduced in real terms as the very component of the work that expresses a critical stance toward the political and economic status quo: appropriative artists have been able to legally argue that performing irrevocable modifications and destructions of ancient artefacts was a form of 'collateral damage' for the sake of an artistic – higher – purpose. It could be a bitter metaphor for the power of capitalism over any other values that their ownership of the objects was enough to support their cases before a court. In this sense, as illustrated by Setari (37), artists who create works containing desecrating and disrespectful content often aim to challenge institutions or individuals who represent a particular tradition that they seek to subvert. This approach can be seen as a critical contribution to the evolution of art and society, rather than an act of vandalism. Through their work, these artists challenge the status quo and promote positive change, establishing themselves as progressive figures.

Fig. 2: Gianluca Cosci. *Double Negative #1*. 2014. Oil on found painting, 58 x 48.7 cm.

Following the paradox of the iconoclast as a positive figure, since 2011 I have been buying old paintings in antique shops, where unexpected discoveries can often be made. My attention is regularly drawn to bourgeois paintings, mostly dated between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, because I am fascinated by the implicit aspiration for social belonging that shines through these conventional works, whether religious themes or portraits. The impression these paintings give me is that of a desire for self-representation of a certain socio-economic status in an attempt to convey respectability, solidity, and decorum.

Before buying those old paintings, I have to imagine my hypothetical pictorial interventions on them; a gesture that could be seen as cruel and disrespectful. The purchase of these artefacts is the beginning of a creative process conceived as a parodistic and ironic demonstration of the power of ownership over the possessed object, leaving the owner complete freedom in relation to the artefact, regardless of how artistically relevant it may be.

In using ancient works as a palimpsest, my main reason is to make a demonstrative action that could expose the inherent contradiction present in a capitalist logic that has economic profit as its main purpose over any other goal, including social welfare or cultural promotion. My modified ready-made artworks are intended to contain this subtle socio-economic critique along with a pictorial intervention that aesthetically 'updates' and disrupts the original identity.

This willingness to 'update' the found relic through artistic appropriation is also part of the eclectic practice of Austrian artist Markus Schinwald (Praun). He meticulously restores heavily damaged Biedermeier portraits only to add on them disturbing and incongruous details, painted to seamlessly match the style of the original canvas, thereby creating uncanny effects not devoid of surreal and dark humour. His additions clearly nod to the *detournements* by the Situationist International artists but it is in a much more refined and delicate way "in the turbulence between the familiar and the foreign that they . . . find the space to stage their absorbingly subversive incursions" (Kastner).
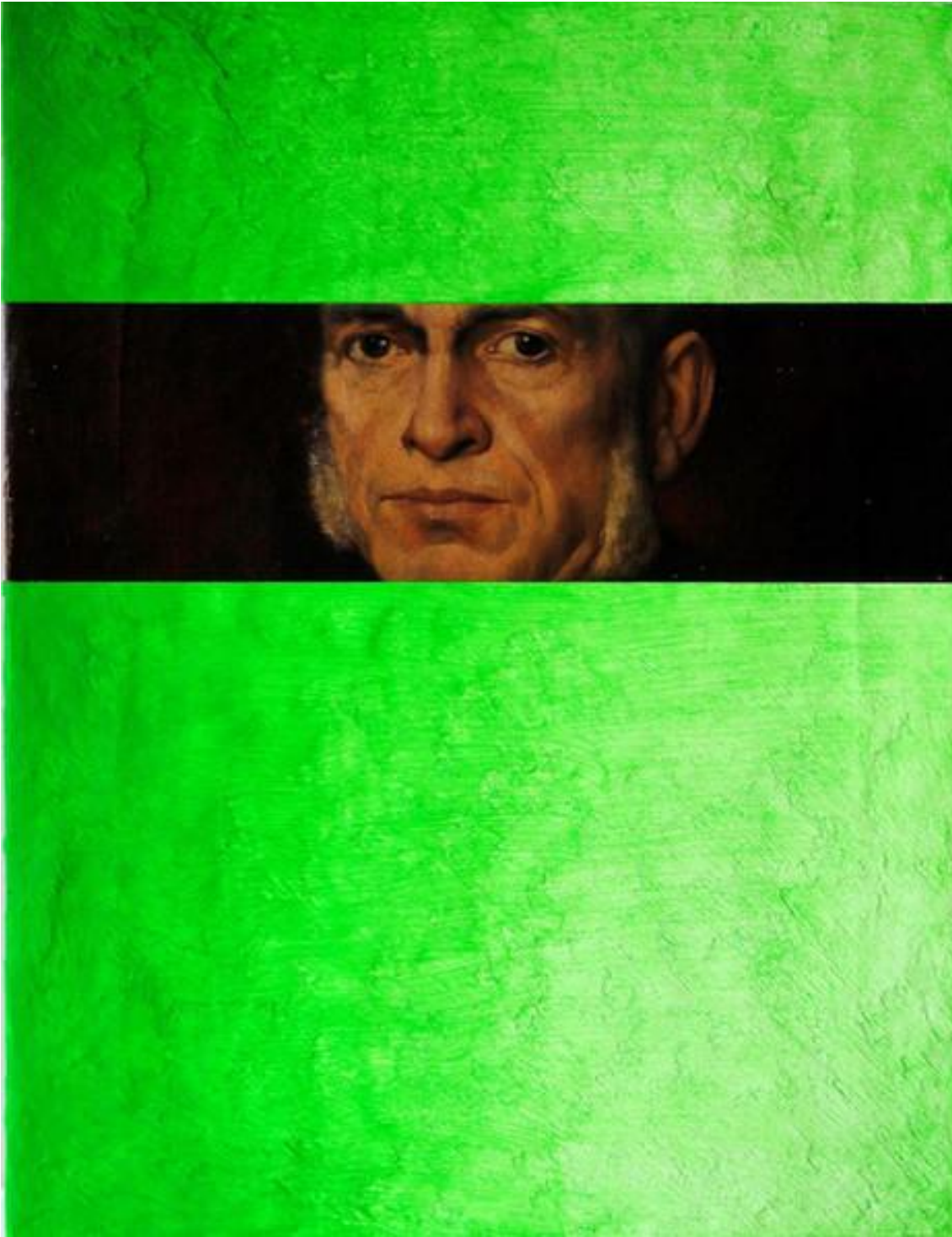
Fig. 3: Gianluca Cosci. *Untitled #4*. 2012. Acrylic on found painting, 50 x 38.5 cm.

My interventions, as in Schinwald's case, also consist in applying oil paint on old canvases but generally I tend to cover a greater surface of the original painting. The overpainting resembles thereby a monochromatic coating with various shading effects, without completely hiding the original image, leaving visible the most vital elements of the old canvases: usually the eyes. Even with this coating, the presence of the underlying surface still manages to be felt, as suggested by Weiwei: "[Y]ou cover something so that it is no longer visible but it is still there underneath, and what appears on the surface is not supposed to be there but it is there" (qtd. in Holzwarth 172).

In using Appropriation Art processes pioneered by Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, among others, a shift is made from the original authorship to the 'appropriator'. The new artistic ownership is also reflected in the unapologetic and blunt commercialisation of these artworks within the contemporary art market. The appropriative discourse is paradoxically reinforced because those artists make themselves and their dealers, as well as their collectors and art institutions, part of their own critical targets, renouncing the hypothetical higher moral ground of the preacher "in an attempt to counteract the division of artistic labour in a society that restricts the artist to the manufacturer of luxury goods destined for the real agents of art world appropriation – the dealer, the collector, the museum" (Owen 115). Indeed, I am allowed to intervene on and modify existing paintings for the simple reason that I am their legitimate owner. No other circumstances would be legally acceptable, as already demonstrated by the legendary *Erased de Kooning Drawing* by Robert Rauschenberg when Willem de Kooning gave one of his own drawings to the younger artist for the sole reason to be obliterated (Roberts). Without this crucial agreement between the two artists, the significance of this operation would have been seriously compromised. The legality of ownership is essential to avoid being affiliated to the assorted individuals who deface artworks in museums and cultural sites for the most various reasons and under diverse circumstances: from mental health conditions to 'artistic' or political motives (Setari 77). For example, as we speak, the news reports almost daily on the actions of activists from various organisations such as *Just Stop Oil* or *Extinction Rebellion* who deface iconic works of art to promote the environmentalist cause as described by Lamberti and Solomon.

Fig. 4: Gianluca Cosci. *Untitled*. 2022. Oil on found painting with original frame, 55 x 45 cm.

My decision to use 'real' found paintings rather than their photographic reproductions is an essential aspect of my work because my pictorial interventions must always be on the physical surface of the appropriated artwork, to authentically question, challenge and confront it. It is in these 'real' actions that my practice can contribute to the debate about the tradition of iconoclastic practices, even with regard to the artist's own paintings. An example is the case of Arnulf Rainer, who played with the notion of overpainting in a conceptually intriguing mirror game between vandalism and 'self-defence':

> Overpainting became the essential modus operandi for Arnulf Rainer, culminating (from our point of view) in the unsurpassably ambiguous discovery in 1994 that twenty-five of his paintings and photographs had been overpainted in his studio at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts – by right-wingers trying to defame contemporary art according to the local press – by himself to help stimulate a stagnant market according to the police (Gamboni 123).

I have also worked on my older paintings as a palimpsest for newer works, openly acting as a hypothetical external agent overpainting during successive moments on a supposedly completed work. Usually, my interventions on my own paintings occur several months or even years after the original works are completed. In doing so, the new layers also act as 'reactivators' of the older surfaces, while partially obliterating them. My work is situated in the ambiguous space in which the covered image acquires a new and inaccessible aura precisely by virtue of its partial disappearance. In this sense, I use the existing painting as a three-dimensional palimpsest to construct a new visual presence by erasing the older one. Covering the surface of an old painting with a layer of paint can create new focal points based on what is left detectable.

The choice of the oil painting as a covering medium is due to the quasi irrevocability of this technique. It is important that the oil paint allows a certain degree of visibility of the underneath painted image, according to its density and fluidity, behaving almost like a permanent veil over the original image. The visual hierarchy is, therefore, overturned by impeding the sight of specific areas of the image, subverting the original intention of what is worthy of our attention, what is barred, highlighted, or hidden. In this re-direction of the gaze lies a creative freedom that contemplates the possibility of the negation of the image itself. This visual denial can have an evocative effect that might even highlight the latent elements reminiscent of the erased presences in a Cy Twombly painting:

> The innocence is simply that characteristic potentiality of the not-yet, a condition of duality, in that sensations are transmitted here whose expressive form Twombly has found in an artistic structure that one can describe as a palimpsest. We mean the superimposing of layers, the erasures of older

meanings, their being overwritten through new signs, etc. The hidden contains thus an underground presence; fills the painting with anxiety, with desire and drives. This finding can also be described with words such as sediment, latency or accumulation, which all imply potentialities that have not been differentiated or not completely so (Boehm 71).

The element of violence and destruction seems, nevertheless, to be taken over by an almost aesthetic longing to hide previous images so as to both render that image visible and to use it as a kind of underlayer for something new to appear. Arnulf Rainer already started overpainting his own canvases in 1952 in an attempt to evoke what he defines as *Geheimnis* or "mystery" (Rastorfer).

In embracing mystery, there is an awareness that the invisible is often more important than the visible and that verbalisation – like the image itself – can be misleading and cannot adequately convey the human spiritual dimension, as Cottin states in relation to Rainer's overpaintings. Similarly, I am not interested in destruction as such, but rather in the process of deliberately covering a palimpsest, thus generating a tension between concealment and revelation in an attempt to approach a contemplative dimension that can allow the perception of the subtlest nuances.

This is the reason why I need to use painting instead of more brutal interventions like cutting holes in existing artworks or decapitating sacred images, which would perhaps be more typically in line with other iconoclastic artistic practices, like in the case of Danh Võ when for examples, he squeezes

> parts of a medieval sculpture of St. Joseph into six pieces of luggage (Untitled, 2008). The saint's half face and severed fingers fit neatly into the zip-up compartment of a leather bag. What initially may have been a hilarious take on economic pragmatism, as well as a cheeky echo of the colonial seizure of 'foreign' artefacts, has since evolved into an aesthetic register and elaborate fetish in its own right. (Heiser)

In contrast, when I use found paintings, I do not have these cruel and ironic overtones: I tend to maintain a more formalistic awareness, closer to certain minimalist sensibilities in the tradition of monochromatic painting like superimposing an Ellsworth Kelly or a Pieter Vermeersch on an old master's painting. Ultimately, my intent is not to laugh at the expense of the original artefact, but rather to explore the possibilities of new aesthetic and transcendent dimensions through the partial denial of the image.

The Veil

After the U.S. troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, the resurgence of the Taliban left the country in a similar situation as when U.S. forces had arrived 20 years earlier ("Taliban Are Back"). This has meant a blanket imposition of a strict interpretation of the Sharia law throughout the country and the consequent iconoclastic acts on anything considered 'un-Islamic', including the covering or destruction of advertisements depicting female models (Giordano). But the covering of those images is also a clear message directed to an international audience to mark the return of a socio-political climate that has permitted the destruction of the *Buddhas of Bamiyan* in March 2001 by the very same Talibans, on orders from leader Mullah Mohammed Omar (Harding). That dramatic event was only the first of a series of spectacular destructions aimed at artworks in the twenty-first century from religious fanatics who typically manipulate theology for their political ends as observed by Freedberg: "[The religious fanatics] know that whether circulated or eliminated, both images and their destruction have the capacity to convey messages that are predicated upon the arousal of the deepest fantasies and fears" (88).

The whitewashing of publicity photographs depicting young brides by a Taliban follower in Kabul in August 2021 (Giordano) was a particularly haunting act to me because it underlines the irrepressible power of images, even when they are hidden or seemingly erased. The same energy (with some visual coincidences) can be felt beneath the layers of paint of some contemporary Western artists who work on the idea of layering white, as in the case of Robert Ryman who often covers his canvases with white paint that resembles transparent veils. His *Surface Veil* series is realized through subtle visual effects that invite the viewer to increase their visual perception to discover the exquisite pictorial nuances layered on top of each other: "In each of these works the pigment appears to form a membrane over the support due to the differing degrees of opacity and translucence in the white paint juxtaposed with areas where less of it has been applied, leaving the fabric exposed. These disruptions in the painting's skin often mark the literal pauses between the artist's working sessions" (Blessing).

In this way, the works are not only refined visual records of the artist's activity. They can certainly also be inscribed in a genealogy of poetic visual silences, pauses, and sensory reductions that are not to be equated with 'nothingness', rather, they are the infinite richness of the perceptible through elusive suggestions and indefinable features: "Sometimes, looking at a Ryman is like looking at light coming in through a white window blind, its qualities changing through the day. He makes you focus, not least on your own looking. White marks squirm over rust-coloured metal and spreads softly like snow over a square" (Searle).

My fascination with Ryman stems from his ability to sharpen the senses through paintings made of nuances that ask only to be contemplated in person, slowly, and with concentration. His works almost refuse to be reproduced by photographic means, much less consumed on a screen, online. There is almost a mystical dimension to his work that I find inspiring and akin to my sensibility.

However, in my work I generally prefer oil colour spread in regular brush strokes, following the longer side of the canvas, in a sensual and slow manner. I always try to have surprises during the execution of the painting. The work must always contain a component that escapes too rigid control so as to achieve unpredictable outcomes, such as the fortuitous shadow effects or patches of light that may, suddenly, appear.

Already for some years, I have been using this sort of 'window curtain', in which the last layer of paint could be seen as a separation, a limitation that prevents optical vision in favour of another, more transcendent one that functions almost like an iconostasis: that separation between the nave and the sanctuary that acts as a filter between the worldly and the spiritual dimensions through which to glimpse the light of God's glory (Florensky).

One can only assume or visualise an image metaphorically hidden under a veil that simultaneously reveals and hides various elements depending on the density of the paint itself. In this way, the view of the image remains limited, refusing to reveal itself completely to the viewer. The final layer partially conceals the image but, in doing so, makes manifest its detached and unknowable dimension. Concealment of the visible can thus become the tool to achieve an understanding that can be defined as mystical, eluding verbal translation as affirmed by Arnulf Rainer in relation to his own overpaintings.

It is with this spirit that I also overpaint my own older, finished paintings. I consider the temporal distance between the 'completed' painting and the final intervention as an essential detachment necessary to obtain an emotional separation from the initial work, almost treating it as somebody else's creation. The overpainting is usually made using deep dark or whiteish paint, almost as a form of censorship or negation. This concealment could be interpreted as a suppression or disavowal but at the same time it is a 'reactivator' that invites intimate, quieter scrutiny as only when seen closely, the underlaying surface makes itself gradually visible.

Overpainting has been documented throughout the history of art, but I use this notion to question the very act of seeing, as the underlying image becomes relevant paradoxically because it is obliterated, thus acquiring a different character when its visibility is compromised and rising to another kind of force by virtue of its erasure.

Several contemporary artists have chosen to erase their previous paintings as part of their art practice, as in the case of David Ostrowski who challenges the notion of 'completed' painting by partially overpainting it. In one of his recent exhibitions, he included a series of figurative paintings dating back ten years and never exhibited before, on which he partially applied a layer of white paint. In my view, with this almost self-censorship of his older paintings the artist was effectively editing his past, quite literally, creating one new body of work while eliminating another: "I'm . . . trying to find the right elements and possibly trap them on the surface of the canvases, but the act of painting very often corresponds to destroying, if you're too sure of what's going on, it's not a good sign" (Ostrowski [my translation[1]]).

Obviously, this sort of 'window blind' made of paint has little to do with the whitewashing perpetrated by the Taliban, which is a disturbing example of political repression and violent censorship. The only possible association might lie in the use of paint as a covering agent and also in the fact that the underlying images can resist attempts to erase them, even when they are no longer visible, because the auratic power of the images can persistently re-emerge and be felt even from beneath the layers of censoring paint.

Unfortunately, the use of paint as a censoring method has been used in innumerable cases in which artists have endured official censorship or institutional vandalism. For example, in the notorious event involving *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* by Andy Warhol: The artist was invited by Philip Johnson to create a specific work for the New York pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair but instead of presenting his well-known series of celebrities' portraits or consumerist products, Warhol appropriated mugshots of criminals, who happened to be mostly of Italian origins, in order to create a huge mural on the building's façade. Soon after its completion Robert Moses, the president of the world's fair, ordered the removal of the work following Governor Nelson Rockefeller's decision who was concerned that the work would alienate his large Italian-American constituency (Scott). As a reaction, Warhol decided to cover up *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* with aluminium house paint, effectively creating a silver monochrome in its place (Meyer 89).

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[1] *Sto . . . cercando di trovare gli elementi giusti e possibilmente di intrappolarli sulla superficie delle tele, ma l'atto di dipingere corrisponde molto spesso a distruggere, se sei troppo sicuro di quello che sta succedendo, non è un buon segno.*
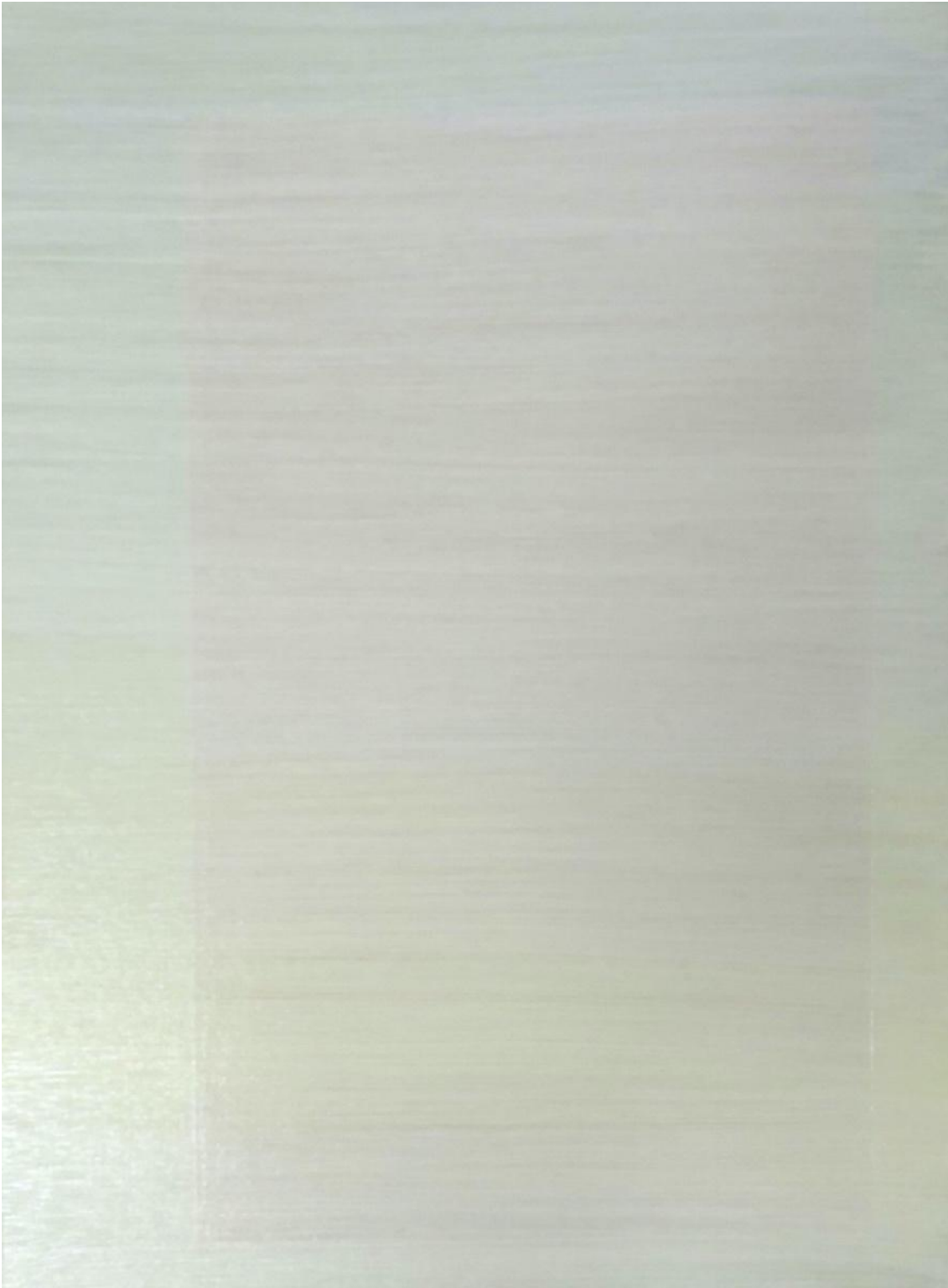
Fig. 5: Gianluca Cosci. *Whitewashing #3*. 2011-2014. Oil on canvas on cardboard, 50 x 35 cm.

The uneasiness created by *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* was such that the silver monochrome superimposed on it was not enough to completely cover the potentially subversive power of the original artwork. Hence, weeks after the mural was painted over, the fair's managers decided to further cover it up, using a huge black drape: "It was as though the most wanted men still haunted the scene of representation after their evacuation from it, dismaying fair officials even when muted under a field of minimalist abstraction. The mural, a work explicitly concerned with mechanisms of surveillance and social control, was thus twice covered over, doubly closeted at the 1964 World's Fair" (Meyer 89).

Evidently, the power of those images was so strong that only a black, funereal cloth could totally silence that inconvenient presence, becoming an awkward monument to the unspeakable and unseeable. Instead of neutralizing the controversial images, the silver overpainting only emphasized the visual charisma of the underlying images, making the incident even more problematic for the censors. For this reason, one should emphasize the importance of latency as a driving force that can trigger imagination, interest, and desire; a concept almost contrary to the current general tendency – online and offline – to show too much: "To embrace latency goes against the grain of the logic of compulsive performativity because it is all about leaving things unsaid, unshown, unrevealed, it is about refraining from actualising and thereby exhausting all your potentials in the moment of your performance. We have to re-think and learn to re-experience the beauty of latency" (Verwoert 146).

Indeed, the notion of latency informs much of my research in its various aspects. I see latency almost as a metaphorical invitation to the viewer to follow the Duchampian principle of taking an active role in the interpretation and completion of the work of art (Haladyn), also in the sense of filling in its missing visual and narrative elements.

I believe this is an apt synthesis for my practice, where the various declinations of visual negation do not equate emptiness and destruction, but creativity and discovery. The compromised image can thus be a key to explore other dimensions, silent but no less powerful, through the evocative power of latency as a possible remedy to the inadequacy of verbal tools to fully express *Geheimnis*.
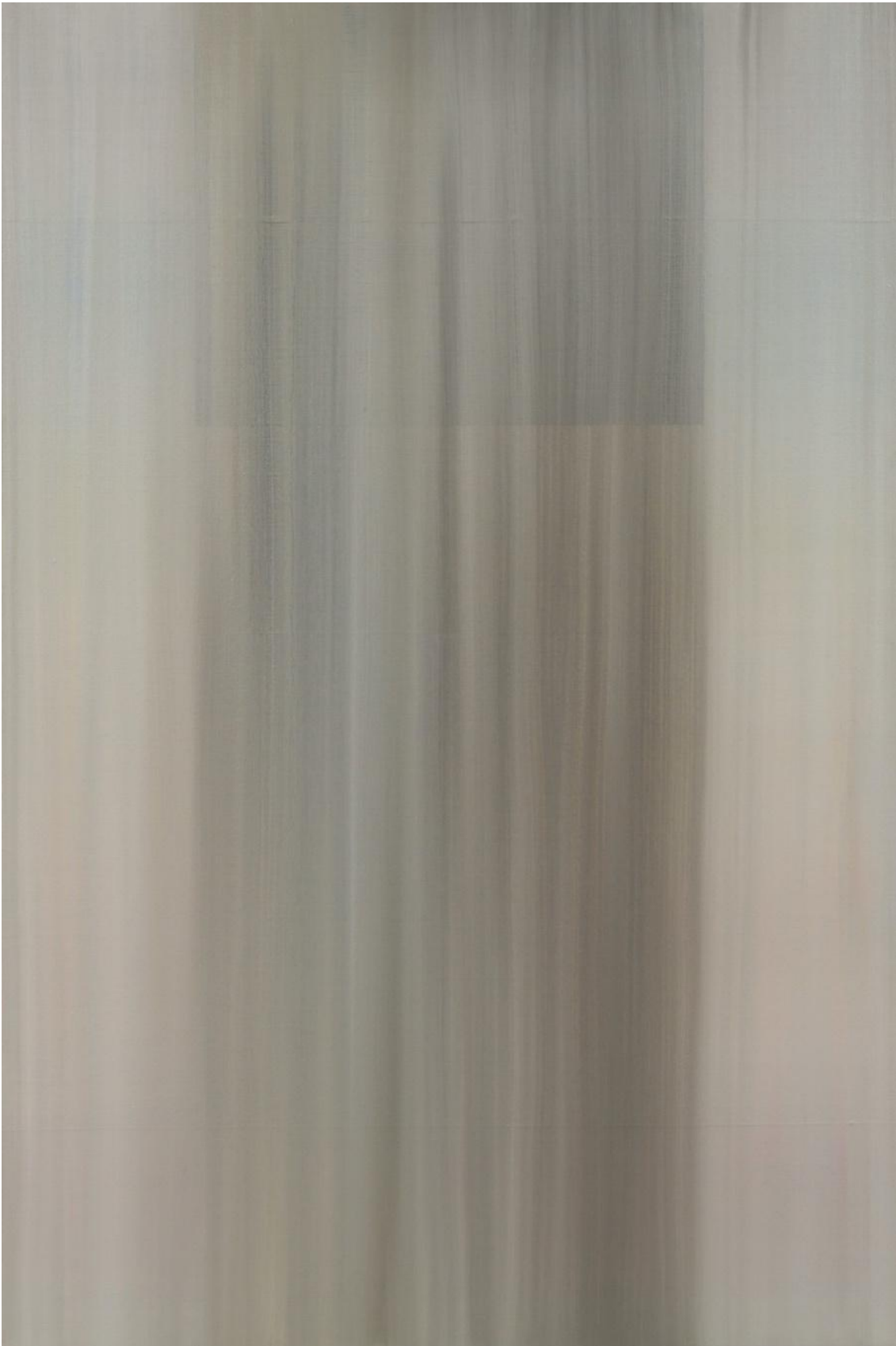
Fig. 6: Gianluca Cosci. *Untitled*. 2021. Oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm.

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